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History of Ravenna, Kentucky

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HISTORY

—OF—

RAVENNA

KENTUCKY

—BY—



W. T. (Billy) WILLIAMS

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HISTORY OF RAVENNA

By W. T. (Billy) WILLIAMS

Traveling in a Southeasterly direction from Richmond, Kentucky, on Route 52 you pass through the physiographical region of Kentucky known as the Knobs until reaching a point approximately two miles from Irvine, where you suddenly enter into the Pottsville Escarpment. This distinction is readily noticeable as the Knobs seem to end abruptly at West Irvine. The road through the Knobs is winding and hilly. While the entire state is usually divided into six major geographical regions the Pottsville Escarpment is sometimes included as a seventh. It seems, as a tourist once told me when stopping in Irvine, to serve as a brief respite from driving through the tiring Knobs before entering into the even more exacting Cumberland Plateau with its hills and winding curves which put the Knobs to shame in so far as ruggedness is concerned. This section of Kentucky is only about five miles across at this point and seems oddly out of place breaking the continuity of the hilly region.

Crossing the Kentucky River and entering Irvine one travels only a block before he is in front of the courthouse, a rather large building of sandstone, constructed in 1939. Irvine is a typical mountain county seat and has always been thus absorbing the economic changes which have come to her rather handily with the support and help of the agricultural regions which are found surrounding her.

Traveling through Irvine, which, for its population of only three

thousand is rather long, for approximately two miles one crosses a small bridge over Chamberlain Branch which forms the northern boundary of Ravenna. Locally Chamberlain Branch is known as Al Hollow. It is difficult for a stranger to tell just when he is in Irvine or Ravenna since they are so closely connected both physically and economically. They are sometimes called the Twin Cities and this is the name used by several different businesses both in Ravenna and Irvine. An arbitrary line forms the eastern and southern limits of the city and a line parallel with the railroad tracks forms the boundary on the western side. Strangely, Ravenna's economic life is the railroad, but yet, only a few hundred feet of track lies within the city itself. The town was built up almost exactly parallel to the railroad switching yards, the most of which lie in the county.

Ravenna is not old; as late as 1900-1910 it was only an open field composed of two farms known as the Old Cockrell and the Old Parks farms. There were two tenant houses located on the present site of Ravenna and this constituted its only buildings. There was a corduroy toll road running the length of the farms in the direction of Beattyville. Parts of this road are still in evidence just outside the city on the Stacy Farm.

Between 1910 and 1915 the Louisville and Nashville Railroad decided to install a switching yards and "shops" in or near Ravenna's pres-

ent site for the transporting of coal from the Eastern coal fields and for the maintenance of its engines, cars and equipment, this is Ravenna's birth. The story has come to the author that the railroad had planned to construct the shops in Irvine but moved the site because the city threatened to charge the company a high tax rate. However, there seems to be little basis for this as the railroad is located almost entirely outside the corporate limits of the two cities.

The shops or "round house" was constructed in 1915 along with a considerable portion of the switching yards. John D. Sawyer of Kew-
 swich, Virginia, was an official of the L. H. & St. L. R. R. Co. (Louisville, Henderson and St. Louis), owned by the Louisville and Nashville, and he caused to be organized the Ravenna Realty Co., he as president and Mrs. Kate H. Sawyer, secretary. On December 1, 1915, attorney R. R. Friend of Irvine, acting as trustee for the Ravenna Realty Company, purchased the Parks and Cockrell farms. The Ravenna Realty Company had been formed solely for the disposition of the property acquired by the company and this property was marked off in lots for sale to the employees of the railroad for use in constructing homes and business places. The company completed the selling of its real estate about 1930 and ceased to exist. Mrs. Sawyer is credited with the naming of the realty company and consequently the naming of the city itself. It is thought that she named the company after Raven-

na, Ohio.

In a sense, Ravenna could be called a boom town since its birth coincided with the outbreak of World War I. From 1915 to 1920 its population increased from a few souls to nearly 1,000. This does not seem too great an increase but when we consider its start it becomes rather significant. At any rate, it had grown to the extent that several citizens thought that it should be incorporated as a city and so in the January term of the Estill County Court of 1921 it was duly incorporated as a sixth class city. A city council form of government was set up replacing the trustee type which had served the village before its incorporation. The first members of the board were W. C. Robbins, W. J. McLe-
 more, C. H. Smith, R. L. McLemore and W. S. Yaden as chairman. Dudley Webb was the first marshal; G. Hackworth the first police judge and Mack Richardson the city assessor.

The first few years of the city saw it progress greatly in so far as the passing of ordinances were concerned but in the field of civic improvements little was done until 1925. Some of the first ordinances, while probably necessary for the time, seem rather strange to us now. But, in them we can easily see, more realistically, just how our fathers and grandfathers lived and too, realize a unit of measurement with which to understand the growth and development of the community. Also here we find our most vivid picture of everyday life in the early years of the century. There was a fine of five dollars for

spitting on the streets (which were dirt) and profanity on the streets was dealt with by a one dollar fine for each and every offense, so one can see that words came high in the early days. Each hog found running loose on the streets was impounded and the owner charged one dollar per day per hog as cost of boarding it until called for. Cows loose on the streets with a bell or other noise making device around the neck were impounded for disturbing the peace and the owner was charged one dollar for each cow. This must have become a rather troublesome thing for the fine was soon increased to twenty-five dollars. One object of this ordinance was to insure quietness during the day hours so those who were required, by the nature of their jobs, to work at night could sleep; also its purpose was so the sick would not be disturbed.

Oak Street was changed to Main Street in 1922. The first census was ordered taken on December 12, 1923, and William Ballard was appointed census taker. Mr. Ballard turned in the names of 1245 citizens to the council and was paid fifty dollars for his work. The council then moved that Ravenna be advanced to the status of a fifth class city and House Bill 28 of the 1924 session of the Kentucky State Legislature provided for this change. There was also attached to the bill the stipulation, if it may be called such, that no state funds would be provided for the civic development and improvement of the city. Whether this added piece of legislation was intended as a reminder to the City Council, a mat-his farm near Williamsburg where

ter of form or in reply to a question brought before the Body by the City Council is not quite clear. However, it did bring to mind the fact that if Ravenna was to have paved streets she would have to carry the burden of all the expenses which accompany such conveniences.

It seems, from history, that in the course of the development of a nation, state or city there always appears to be one or a few persons of whom you can say: "He or they have contributed most to the development of this nation, city or state," and so it is with Ravenna. If one must choose one person who has contributed most, has taken a greater interest in the town's civic development, then he must inevitably choose Clark C. Stanfill, mayor of Ravenna from 1924 to 1929. Often these men who play this role are men who come upon the scene, do their work, depart, and are seldom heard of again. This seems especially true of Mr. Stanfill. He was born and reared in Whitley County, Kentucky, and owned a farm on U. S. Highway 25W about six miles south of Williamsburg. He rented out his farm and came to Ravenna and went into the merchandising business. Apart from serving as mayor of Ravenna for five years he also served as an able and efficient sheriff of Estill County from 1930 to 1934. From all the contemporary reports of those who knew him best he is pictured as an honest and willing servant of the public; a man of integrity and ability. After his term as sheriff expired he returned to he died during the winter of 1954-55. It was during Mr. Stanfill's

term as mayor of the town that the greatest progress was made in the development of the community. He was first elected mayor on April 25, 1924.

There is a story behind his work on the street project which seems to portray his character rather well. Irvine had just paved Main and Broadway streets with an oil composition type of pavement by the Irvine Construction Company whose head was James A. Wallace. Mr. Wallace was high in Republican politics and influence as was Mr. Stanfill. There were several attempts made to get Mr. Stanfill to accept the oil composition type of pavement but he was strong for the concrete type. H. M. Shumate, who was city attorney of Ravenna at the time, also was strong for the concrete type of streets, and he, like Mayor Stanfill, was greatly in favor of the W. T. Congleton Construction Company of Lexington, headed by Mr. Congleton himself who later served as mayor of Lexington. This company had a fine reputation for doing good work. After considerable discussion by the board members it was decided to let the job to bids and three companies submitted bids for the job: W. T. Congleton, \$2.99 per sq. yard; Irvine Construction Company, \$3.20 per sq. yard, and Hazard Construction Company, \$3.35 per sq. yard. There was also attached to the bids a total cost estimate which included storm sewers, curbing, etc. The total cost estimates were \$60,000, \$67,000 and \$69,000 respectively. Some citizens offered opposition to the construction of the streets due to the cost

involved and made their cause known at one of the meetings of the board. The residents were to pay so much per foot for the frontage of their property to help meet the cost of the construction. The board decided to put the issue squarely before the people in the election of November 4, 1924, when they were to vote on whether the board would be allowed to sell bonds to help meet the cost of construction. The results were in favor of the board and the way was cleared. The bonds were duly sold and construction went ahead without further delay.

C. M. Molstad had been appointed city engineer previously at the salary of one dollar per year. It should be said that the streets of Ravenna are a standing tribute to the persistence and efforts of Mr. Stanfill and the members of the board at that time. Where the streets of Irvine have been repaved several times they still cannot compare with the streets of Ravenna which have hardly been touched in the way of repair. They serve as a lasting tribute to his interest and work on behalf of the citizens of Ravenna. If I may again borrow from his contemporaries we find that he is given full credit for the concrete street construction. However, I think it only fair to say that he received considerable help from the other members of the board. The members of the street committee were M. T. Bach, J. C. Powell and Dr. E. S. Caywood. H. P. Moore was also an able member of the board at this time. It was the job of the street committee to inspect each part of

the work that was completed and report on it to the mayor and the council.

Mr. Stanfill can also be given credit for other things; he sold the gas franchise so that the citizens of the community could enjoy the convenience it offered. This was done in 1927. He also sold the water franchise in 1928 and the telephone franchise in this same year.

Of course, Ravenna being a railroad town, her economic life can be determined by feeling the pulse of the railroad. The shops provided a vital link in the efficiency of the railroad between Louisville and Hazard and the Eastern coal fields of the Cumberland Plateau until recently. It still is an important junction but its importance has been lessened somewhat by the employment of modern methods of transportation. Statistics compiled by the railroad show that 248,184 cars of coal alone had passed thru Ravenna's yards at the end of 1954. Figuring each car to carry an average of fifty tons of coal this makes over twelve and one-half million tons which have been received in the Ravenna-Irvine yards and then passed on through. This, of course, does not include the thousands of other cars of freight which have been shipped in and out. This traffic has been more or less regulated by the economic situation of the nation and the demand for coal. Until 1949 it required any where from eight to eleven hours to make the run from Hazard to Ravenna. Sometimes when the crews "dog-lawed" after sixteen hours on the road the sending out of another crew to bring

the train in was necessary. Different reasons kept the crews out over the maximum of sixteen hours. Sometimes it was accidents but more often than not it was the necessity of having to pull the entire train off to a "siding" in order to let an oncoming train pass. However, this time was decreased to approximately four and one-half to five hours by the installation of the C.T.C. (Centralized Traffic Control System) which made possible the throwing of switches from the Ravenna yards to Hazard by the use of electrical impulses. This improvement naturally cost many jobs and consequently the town suffered. It has been estimated by some of the men who operated on this line that the full complement was cut by at least one half.

Another improvement by the railroad also cut the number of men, possibly not at the time of its employment but surely later; this was the addition of the stoker to the engine which enabled the steam engines to pull eighty or more cars of coal instead of the original forty-five to fifty which they pulled in the twenties. This made possible the hauling of more coal by the same number of men. The replacement of the steam engine by the diesel also cost many jobs since the diesels can be operated much longer without repair and their repair is usually much faster. Before the coming of the diesel the steam engines were repaired in the Ravenna shops; the diesels are usually repaired in Louisville and are only refueled in Ravenna. The removal of the men

who were used in repairing the steam engines and those employed in heavy repair seriously injured Ravenna's economy. The dieselization of the Ravenna area came in February of 1954. To replace these jobs lost to the advances of science many of the younger men in Ravenna who had little or no seniority on the railroad began traveling long distances each day to acquire work; most of them finding employment either at the Blue Grass Ordnance Depot near Richmond or at the Army Signal Corps Depot near Lexington. Many of the older residents of Ravenna have retired and elected to live on in the town, which, of course, helped the economy some. The economy has suffered; of this there is no doubt. However, the shock seems to have worn off and at present it seems somewhat stabilized and probably will continue to be.

Ravenna has no banking system, relying on Irvine for this. However at one time it did have. On July 1, 1921, the Ravenna State Bank was organized and this establishment lasted until September 1, 1929, when the Farmers Bank, The W. T. B. Williams & Sons Bank and the Ravenna State Bank were merged into the Union Bank & Trust Company at Irvine. Could it be that the gentlemen involved received some word from a prophet on the coming economic crash of the coming month and merged for strength?

Ravenna has six churches; the first being built was the Christian. As for education Ravenna is classified as an independent school district and has one of the finest elementary schools. When the town

was first started there was a small frame building which served as the schoolhouse. In 1926, a modern brick structure was built complete with a large auditorium through the efforts of J. E. Alexander, Walter Bush and G. Hackworth. The general feeling which seems to prevail in Ravenna is that Ravenna has been fortunate in being able to always have teachers who were ever mindful of the needs, wants and desires of the children and were always found trying to meet those demands. One of the teachers, Mrs. Louise Gibson, was recently honored after having served thirty years in the Ravenna system. Ravenna does not have a high school but does pay the tuition of the students to go to secondary schools in Irvine, either at the county school or the city high school. It is left to the student to choose. The school also provides transportation to and from high school for the students. In the late thirties there were several unsuccessful attempts to have a high school constructed through the Federal building program of that time. The present Ravenna Graded School building was dedicated in 1927. Many rural students are found among its pupils.

Ravenna is one of the few towns in Kentucky to boast a National Guard Unit. Of course its personnel is made up of men from Ravenna, Irvine and Estill County and this is probably one of the reasons it has always had a fine organization and has always won its share of honors. One of its number, from Ravenna, Lindy Yeager, was selected to attend West Point where he

was an able representative, graduating high in his class. Company H is a part of the 149th Infantry which is designated as a regimental Combat team. The company is a heavy weapons company. During the Second World War the regiment served ably as part of the 38th Division in the Pacific Theatre. This division had the unique honor of being the one selected to avenge Bataan and now has a shoulder patch designating it as the "Avengers of Bataan" Division. Company H had the greatest number of its men selected for officers candidate school and a greater number of commissioned officers from its ranks than any other company in the 38th Division, an accomplishment which speaks for itself and for the training and caliber of the men it produced. Company H, which can trace its history back 189 years, was organized at Ravenna by Captain Monroe T. Bach in 1932. Captain Bach served as mayor of Ravenna from 1929 until his death in 1933. A modern Armory was constructed in 1934 and was dedicated in his memory as Bach Hall. The citizens of Ravenna can well be proud of the accomplishments of its men on foreign fields.

The present fire department was organized in 1945 on a volunteer basis with approximately twenty members. They have a modern fire truck and use the water hydrants of the railroad and a number of recently constructed city hydrants. For the use of the railroad hydrants they offer the railroad any assistance they can in the protection of

the railroad property. They also have a mutual assistance pact with Irvine which has enabled the citizens of Ravenna to enjoy the savings of a Class A insurance rating. The department has a democratic charter giving the members the right to choose their own fire chief. A siren is mounted on the roof of the City Hall building which is sounded when the need arises to summon the men. The department has a fine record of effective service.

Ravenna's city government is most democratic and depicts best the independence of the people who are content with their town and proud of its reputation of a clean and beautiful city, even though small. The City Council consists of six men who are elected every two years. The mayor is elected every four years; the police judge every four years. The mayor and councilmen do not run on Republican or Democratic slates, but rather on independent tickets such as "The Open Book Ticket" and "The Railroad Ticket." Taxes in Ravenna for municipal purposes consist of a property tax of seventy-five cents on the hundred dollar evaluation; privilege license, and a five dollar annual automobile tax. A complete report on all receipts and expenditures is mailed to each taxpayer at the end of each year, a system found in few cities. The police department is made up of three men; two regular policemen and one extra who also picks up the garbage. A police keeps the streets clean. A police cruiser is provided for the police

force. The City Hall of Ravenna is located in a frame building directly across from the railroad depot.

Ravenna has not had any famous criminals. However, a man was hanged from a post which used to stand near the present location of the Christian Church in 1857. The following story has been related to the author and is authentic. The condemned man rode from Irvine to his place of execution in a wagon sitting on his casket. He was eating peaches along the way and as the wagon neared the place where he was to pay his debt to society he noticed that the accompanying crowd began to surge forward for choice places from which to view the proceedings, but they were rather abruptly informed by the condemned, "No use to hurry folks, there'll be no hanging until I get there." The condemned wrote a short book while he was in the county jail waiting execution, telling of his wayward life and the events which led him to the hangman's noose. It is interesting to note, and only fair to the unfortunate one, to say that the book is sprinkled throughout with advice for the young to never do wrong and to mind their parents.

A playground for small children is maintained by the Veterans of Foreign Wars which has a post in Ravenna, and this playground is open to everyone. There is an outdoor grill provided on the playground with tables and benches for picnics. A tennis court is also maintained by the V.F.W. for the community. The city is in need of a community center for recreation

for all ages and could use a swimming pool. A community hospital is to be built at Irvine in the near future and will serve Irvine, Ravenna and Estill County.

Even though the city of Ravenna does not have a newspaper the people manage to keep up with all the world by reading either or both of the two weekly Irvine publications.

Ravenna's present population as given by the 1950 census is 979 and since that time it has not grown any; neither could it be said that it has fallen off.

The town is laid off in checker-board fashion and each side of its several streets are lined with trees. The streets are kept clean and the city itself seems to reflect everywhere the type of people who live there. It would be safe to say that most of the present population came from the region to the East as young people and built the town from an open field, once used as farmland and pasture, to its present beauty. They are proud of this accomplishment and justly so. They have worked hard trying to make this town the kind of town which is ideal. Many, to be sure, have contributed more than others and these and their efforts have not gone unnoticed. Few of the houses are large, most being the small homes of people who have little desire for the city to expand and are content to keep their town as it has been for a long time—a small, clean, quiet town, seemingly removed from all of the pressing problems of a complex world.

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